

## **The Correlations among Learning Motivation, Autonomy and Language Proficiency in Chinese EFL Context**

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### **Abstract**

Due to university students' poor English language proficiency in mainland China and the fact that many English educators ascribe this issue to learners' weak autonomy and learning motivation, this study attempted to explore the correlations among learning motivation, learner autonomy, and language proficiency in Chinese EFL context. To arrive at this aim, the cluster sampling method was used to select 458 non-English major students from one university in Henan province, China as research subjects. English Learning Motivation Questionnaire (ELMQ) and Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ) were adopted to investigate the participants' learning motivation and learner autonomy respectively. The participants' language proficiency was measured by their CET-4 scores. Results of the Pearson correlation analysis showed that learning motivation and autonomy were significantly and positively correlated with each other, and both of them had significant positive relationships with language proficiency. The results of path analysis indicated that learning motivation could better predict the variance in language proficiency when compared with learner autonomy. Pedagogical suggestions are offered to English teachers in assisting their students with regards to the improvement of language proficiency.

**Keywords:** China, EFL Learner, Language Proficiency, Learner Autonomy, Learning Motivation

### **Introduction**

In this era of globalization, the English language is the primary and necessary tool for communication among countries all over the world. Now, China has been developing very fast and become the world's largest manufacturing country, which is nicknamed the "world's factory." In such a case, various companies and institutions list English as one of the job requirements across the country. This leads to the growing popularity of English language teaching and learning in various levels of educational institutions. In order to offer more instructions, The Ministry of Education in China issued College English Curriculum Requirements in 2007, which pointed out: "the goal of university English teaching is to enhance students' ability to study independently and improve their general cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.1). However, the English proficiency of Chinese EFL learners ranks towards the bottom among its Asian peers (King, 2015). Moreover, university students in China are in such a predicament that they can read but cannot understand others in

communication, and even if they can follow others, they still do not know how to express themselves (Chen, 2017). This would put the economic competitiveness in China at risk, and jeopardize its sound economic development in the future. Thus, it is crucially important to explore the factors that affect language proficiency among Chinese EFL learners. Many researchers have listed motivation and learner autonomy as efficient and workable variables that determine the success or failure of the process of foreign language acquisition (Teng & Xu, 2015).

## **Literature Review**

### **Learning Motivation**

Learning motivation is often “perceived by teachers and students alike and has a very significant role in explaining failure and success in language learning contexts” (Dincer & Yesilyurt, 2017, p. 4). The degree of effort learners put into learning a foreign language is determined by his/her motivation. Zhang, Su, and Liu (2013) divided motivation into two categories: integrative and instrumental motivation. The former was “wishing to integrate into the target culture,” and the latter was “desiring academic or work-related achievements” (p. 59). Zarei and Elekaei (2012), on the other hand, categorized motivations into two types: intrinsic and extrinsic. The former is usually derived from one’s internal desire to do an activity for the sake of enjoyment and satisfaction, while the latter refers to the obvious desire for instrumental purposes, such as getting praise, gaining awards, or avoiding punishment.

As early as the 1970s, researchers hypothesized that students who were highly motivated would show higher levels of proficiency in foreign language learning (Teng & Xu, 2015). Similarly, Jannati, and Marzban (2014) claimed that the highly motivated learners could get higher scores on an English proficiency test than weakly motivated learners. Gardner (2006) echoed that “students with higher levels of motivation would do better than students with lower levels” (p. 241). He further pointed out that if the learners were highly motivated, he/she would be enthusiastic to participate in learning activities, spare more effort, try their best to complete the tasks, and enjoy the whole learning process. In sum, learning motivation was “one of the most influential factors in language learning, whether the language user/learner is tasked to learn a second/foreign language” (Binalet & Guerra, 2014, p. 251). Recently, studies have revealed that learning motivation acts as a dominant factor in the improvement of language proficiency.

Tan, Lim, and Hoe (2017) explored the correlations between Malay students’ language learning motivations and proficiency in Mandarin. In the study, 133 students from a university in the northern part of Malaysia were enrolled as research subjects. The L2 Motivational Self System Questionnaire was employed as a research instrument. The results indicated that L2 learning experience was significantly related to Malay students’ Mandarin academic achievement. In addition, L2 learning experience that included enjoyment of learning, classroom learning atmosphere, and teaching approach acted as a dominant role in enhancing students’ academic achievements.

Aiming at exploring the correlations among Iranian EFL learners’ personality, motivation and language proficiency, Ebrahimi and Heidarypur (2016) selected 60 students from Mashhad in Iran as research subjects. Data were collected through the use of Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and Laine’s Motivation questionnaire. The correlation analyses suggested that there were significant relationships among motivation, personality and language proficiency. However, results from Multiple Regression analysis showed that personality types made more contributions to students’ academic achievements than motivation. Thus, language lecturers should take students’ personality type and motivation into consideration to help them acquire a foreign language more effectively and efficiently.

By distributing questionnaires to 132 university English major students, Teng and Xu (2015) explored the relationship between different types of motivations and students' academic achievements. The analysis of collected data revealed that two types of motivations -- intrinsic interest motivation and family duty motivation -- could influence students' academic achievements. Thus, they concluded that only some categories of motivations could affect students' language proficiency. However, the results were only based on the investigation of English majors, thus not so representative.

It should be noted that this close relationship between learning motivation and language proficiency is not always the case. Some researchers have obtained the contradictory results in their studies. For instance, Binalet and Guerra (2014) conducted a study on the correlation between learning motivation and language proficiency. An 18-item questionnaire and a grammatical judgment test were used as research instruments to gather data from 30 first-year students. Findings from this study showed that language learning motivation might not be strictly correlated with research subjects' language learning success. Similar results were also found in Lim's (2012) study that there was no significant relationship between Cambodian students' motivation and English language proficiency.

### **Learner Autonomy**

Learner autonomy was coined by Holec (1981) when he made a project report to the Council of Europe. Since then, it has become a hot issue in the field of foreign language teaching and learning. So far, the definition "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (Holec, 1981, p.3), has proved "remarkably robust and remains the most widely cited definition in the field" (Benson, 2007, p. 22). According to this definition, autonomous learners should have some psychological and methodological preparation, but Holec does not make them explicit. Little (1991) realized this and defined learner autonomy as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action" (p. 4), which assumed that the capacity to manage one's learning "depends upon certain underlying psychological capacities" (Benson, 2007, p. 23). While many researchers focus on learners' independence, Morrison (2011) emphasized the necessity of support from lecturers or peers in language learners' learning process, for learner autonomy was "not a solitary experience but rather one in which the learner, in conjunction with relevant others, can make the decision necessary to meet the learner's needs" (p. 31). Although learner autonomy has been defined by different aspects, the typical characteristics of it are that learners should take charge of their learning and be responsible for the learning process partially or entirely. As far as the correlations between autonomy and language proficiency are concerned, more and more empirical studies have verified Benson's (2001) hypothesis that learner autonomy can help improve learners' language proficiency.

Ünal, Çeliköz, and Sari (2017) attempted to look for what extent Turkish ELT learners' autonomy was influenced by their language proficiency level. To arrive at this aim, 326 learners with different proficiency levels were enrolled in the study. ALCPT (American Language Placement Test) was adopted to determine the participants' language proficiency. The data were analyzed by SPSS 22.0. Results of a one-way ANOVA revealed that no significant correlations existed between learners' perceptions of learning autonomy and their proficiency levels, indicating that proficiency may not be an efficient and workable factor in the promotion of learner autonomy.

On the contrary, Tan and Zhang (2015) discovered the positive and significant correlations among learning strategies, autonomy and academic achievements. They chose 212 medical university students as subjects to take part in the survey. The subjects' academic achievements were measured by their CET-4 scores. The data was analyzed by SPSS 11.5 and AMOS 6.0. Their findings revealed that learner autonomy could explain the variance in

language proficiency best. In addition, the subcategories of learning strategies like memory, meta-cognitive, and cognitive strategies could also predict learners' language proficiency.

Similar findings were also found in Mohamadpour (2013)<sup>31</sup> who wanted to change the test-driven learning approach in Iran. Trying to investigate the correlation between autonomy and English proficiency, he selected 30 senior middle school students in Tehran as participants in the study. Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data. Results of a T-test suggested a robust positive relationship between learning autonomy and English proficiency of Senior Middle School Students in Iran. In addition, students with different levels of learning autonomy performed differently on a proficiency test while those of similar learning autonomy got identical test scores.

### **The Relationship between Learning Motivation and Learner Autonomy**

Even though motivation came from a “positivist cognitive paradigm” and is more related to the “development of mental processes, learning outcomes and behaviors” whereas autonomy is derived from a “constructivist paradigm” and referred to “specific context of practice, needs and concerns of particular learners” (Ushioda, 2011, p. 11), the two items were strongly correlated with each other. Ayan (2015) held that the promotion of individuals' autonomy depended greatly on their self-motivation. Moreover, Afshar et al. (2014) held that learners with higher level of autonomy would be strongly motivated in their foreign language acquisition. More and more researches have verified Garcia and Pintrich's<sup>32</sup> (1996) statement that learner autonomy was “more closely related to motivational factors than to performance and...seem(s) to foster intrinsic goal orientation, task value, and self-efficacy, all of which are critical components of ‘continuing motivation’” (p. 477).

Liu (2015) aimed to offer some insights into the construct of learner autonomy and get a deeper understanding of its correlation with motivation among EFL students in Taiwan. The sample in this study was made up of 150 non-English major first-year students in a private university. Through multiple regression analysis, it was found that two types of motivation: the desire to learn a language and attitude toward learning a language, could best predict the variance of learner autonomy. In addition, motivation could also predict learner autonomy significantly, explaining about 50% of the variance in autonomy.

Wang and Xu (2015) researched exploring the correlation between motivation and learner autonomy. The subjects were 300 non-English significant students at a university in Taiyuan, China. Using LISREL 8.70 to analyze the collected data, it was found that intrinsic interest motivation and immediate achievement motivation had a positive relationship with learner autonomy, whereas going abroad motivation and learning situation motivation were negatively correlated with learner autonomy and self-development motivation, and information media motivation did not strictly relate to learner autonomy. However, the sample was only taken from the researcher's class, and the instruments were just questionnaires.

Afshar, Rahimi, and Rahimi (2014) investigated how instrumental motivation, autonomy and critical thinking related to Iranian EFL learners' language proficiency. To achieve this aim, 100 primary English students were chosen as research subjects to fill in two sets of questionnaires on instrumental motivation and autonomy separately. Results from correlation analyses indicated that autonomy had the most substantial positive relationship with language proficiency, whereas instrumental motivation and critical thinking came second and third respectively. In addition, multiple regression analyses indicated that significant thinking acted as the best predictor in explaining the variance in language proficiency, followed by autonomy and instrumental motivation.

Selecting 416 non-English significant students in three universities to participate the questionnaire survey, Xu and Li (2014) looked at the influence of five learners' factors on learning autonomy. Using SEM (structural equation modeling) to analyze different variable's effect on learning autonomy, it was found that subcategories of strategies, i.e., meta-cognition, compensation, memory strategies and information-media motivation could significantly predict the variance in students' autonomous learning ability.

The review of the previous literature shows that there exist close relationships between any two of the three variables: learning motivation, autonomy, and language proficiency. In addition, both learning motivation and learner autonomy can improve students' language proficiency to some extent. However, it is still unclear whether learning motivation directly affects language proficiency or indirectly influences language proficiency through the mediating function of learner autonomy. This empirical study attempts to fill in this void through two research questions:

1) Are there any significant relationships among learning motivation, autonomy, and language proficiency?

2) Which variable could contribute more to the variance in language proficiency: learning motivation or learner autonomy?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The cluster sampling method was employed to select 480 year-three undergraduates from Henan Institute of Science and Technology in Henan province, China, to participate in the survey. The total population in this university was around 30,000, so the utilization of cluster sampling method was economic and feasible for selecting classes as clusters in such a large population. The participants, from different faculties and departments, were majoring in mechanics, fashion design, Chinese studies, pre-school education, tourism, chemistry, communication, civil engineering, and marketing. The language proficiency level of these major students covers elementary, intermediate, and advanced groups, so the sample is representative. Their age range was 21 to 23 years with an average of 21.5, and all of them were not native English speakers. After 22 unusable questionnaires were identified and discarded, 458 cases (95.4% of 480) were left for data analysis eventually, including 213 males and 245 females. All participants had attended College English Test band Four (CET-4).

### **Research Instruments**

Questionnaires were adopted as research instruments because questionnaires could save time, money and human resources compared to other research approaches; get real information owing to participants' anonymity, and generate a great deal of quantitative data in a short time (Dörnyei, 2009). The questionnaire included three parts. The first part was the participants' demographic information as gender, age, major, CET-4 scores, and the name of the university. It should be noted that the participants' language proficiency was measured by their CET-4 scores. The College English Test band Four (CET-4) is a nation-wide English test organized by the Ministry of Education of PRC. It includes writing, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, proofreading, and translation. Moreover, the text types, skills assessment, and quantity and difficulty of items in CET-4 meet test requirements of Ministry of Education well, so it is scientifically designed with high reliability and validity (Zhang & Chen, 2015). Thus, the participants' English language proficiency can be determined by their CET-4 scores.

Secondly, Gao, Zhao, Cheng, and Zhou's (2003) English Learning Motivation Questionnaire (ELMQ) was adopted to measure Chinese EFL students' learning motivation. Before ELMQ was utilized in the actual study, three language teaching professors were invited for evaluating the questionnaire from the aspects of clarity, content validity, and face validity. According to their comments, the order of the items was randomly rearranged, and the item "I learn English mainly for making China more prosperous" was deleted, for it is not the motivation of most university students in today's China. A pilot study was conducted by distributing questionnaires to 50 Chinese EFL learners with similar characteristics to the target groups. The collected data were analyzed by Cronbach alpha to check the reliability and internal consistency of the ELMQ. The coefficients were intrinsic interest (.706), immediate achievement (.755), learning situation (.680), going abroad (.718), social responsibility (.725), individual development (.760), and information media (.710), exceeding the suggested value of .70, thus the reliability of ELMQ was secured. Respondents were required to circle their options on various statements, which were represented by a five-point Likert scale that ranged from "1: never true of me" to "5: always true of me".

Xu's (2004) Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ), as the third instrument, was employed for measuring learner autonomy among Chinese EFL learners. Before LAQ was distributed to the participants, the researcher gave it to three language teaching professors, who were asked to provide their comments on the items from the aspect of clarity, content validity, and face validity. Based on their suggestions, the researcher changed the item "I know teachers' teaching purpose" into "I know the teacher's purpose of employing some learning activities to improve students' language skills", and deleted the item "I think it is important to turn teaching purpose into my learning goals", because it only investigated learners' mental activity rather than their autonomous learning behavior. Then, a pilot study was carried out through the administration of questionnaires to 50 Chinese EFL learners with similar characteristics to the target groups. The collected data was analyzed by Cronbach alpha to check the reliability and internal consistency of LAQ. The coefficients of five subcategories were teaching aims and requirements (.721), learning objectives and plans (.761), using learning strategies (.715), monitoring learning strategy use (.750), and evaluation of learning process (.784), exceeding the suggested value of .70. Thus the reliability of LAQ was ensured. The participants in this study were asked to circle their options on various statements, which were represented by a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "1: strongly disagree" to "5: strongly agree".

## Procedures

First of all, the approval letter was obtained from the Office of Educational Administration at the university. Then, the researcher went to the university after contacting related language teachers. Before the commencement of the survey, participants would be asked to sign a consent form, which included information related to the purpose of the study, data collection method, the estimated time for completing questionnaires, assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, potential risks, and the right to withdraw the research. The consent form was written in Chinese for better understanding. With the help of English language teachers, the researcher distributed questionnaires to the participants. For those who were not sure about the terms of the questionnaire, they could inquire with the researcher immediately. Before collecting questionnaires, the researcher reminded the participants to carefully check whether they had completed all the items or not. After that, the researcher collected the questionnaires with the help of language teachers. The process for distributing and collecting questionnaires lasted about 25 minutes.

## Data Analysis

SPSS Version 19.0 and Amos 21.0 were utilized to analyze the data collected from the survey. Pearson correlation was adopted to determine the relationships among learning motivation, autonomy and language proficiency. Path analysis in Amos 21.0 was run to find out which variable could contribute more to the variance in language proficiency: learning motivation or learner autonomy.

## Results

### The Relationship between Learning Motivation, Autonomy and Language Proficiency

The relationship among learning motivation, autonomy, and language proficiency was explored through Pearson correlation analysis. First of all, the normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity of the collected data were checked by the assumptions test. The results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov showed that all sets of scores were normally distributed ( $p > .05$ ). Additionally, no linearity and homoscedasticity problems existed. As a result, the assumptions were not violated according to the preliminary analysis results.

**Table 1: Pearson Correlations between Learning Motivation and Language Proficiency**

	Learning Motivation	Intrinsic Interest	Immediate Achievement	Going Abroad	Social Responsibility	Information Media	Learning Situation	Individual Development
Language Proficiency	.599**	.442**	.432**	.376**	.347**	.267**	.088	.033
Sig (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.059	.481
N	458	458	458	458	458	458	458	458

\*\* .  $P < 0.01$

Table 1 showed that there was a significant positive correlation between language proficiency and the overall learning motivation ( $r = .599$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Intrinsic interest motivation was found to have the highest significant positive correlation with language proficiency ( $r = .442^{**}$ ,  $p = .000$ ), followed by immediate achievement motivation ( $r = .432^{**}$ ,  $p = .000$ ), going abroad motivation ( $r = .376^{**}$ ,  $p = .000$ ), social responsibility motivation ( $r = .347^{**}$ ,  $p = .000$ ), and information media motivation ( $r = .267^{**}$ ,  $p = .000$ ), whereas learning situation motivation ( $r = .088$ ,  $p = .059$ ) and individual development motivation ( $r = .033$ ,  $p = .481$ ) had no significant relationship with language proficiency.

**Table 2: Pearson Correlations between Learner Autonomy and Language Proficiency**

	Learner Autonomy	Evaluation of Learning Process	Teaching Aims and Requirements	Using Learning Strategies	Monitoring Learning Strategy Use	Learning Objectives and Plans
Language proficiency	.516**	.467**	.457**	.428**	.359**	.239**
Sig (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
N	458	458	458	458	458	458

\*\* . P<0.01

The results in Table 2 demonstrated that learner autonomy was statistically and positively correlated with language proficiency ( $r=.516$ ,  $p=.000$ ). The highest positive relationship was found between the evaluation of learning process and language proficiency ( $r=.467$ ,  $p=.000$ ). The relationship between language proficiency and teaching aims and requirements ( $r=.457$ ,  $p=.000$ ), using learning strategies ( $r=.428$ ,  $p=.000$ ), monitoring learning strategy use ( $r=.359$ ,  $p=.000$ ), learning objectives and plans ( $r=.239$ ,  $p=.000$ ) stood in the second, third, fourth and fifth rank respectively.

**Table 3: Pearson Correlations between Learning Motivation and Learner Autonomy**

	Learning Motivation	Information Media	Intrinsic Interest	Social Responsibility	Going Abroad	Individual Development	Immediate Achievement	Learning Situation
Learner Autonomy	.408**	.486**	.397**	.375**	.337**	.195**	-.153	.079
Sig (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.001	.092
N	458	458	458	458	458	458	458	458

\*\* . P<0.01

The results in Table 3 revealed that learning motivation was positively correlated with learner autonomy ( $.408$ ,  $p=.000$ ). In addition, learner autonomy was significantly and positively related to information media motivation ( $.486^{**}$ ,  $p=.000$ ), intrinsic interest motivation ( $.397^{**}$ ,  $p=.000$ ), social responsibility motivation ( $.375^{**}$ ,  $p=.000$ ), going abroad motivation ( $.337^{**}$ ,  $p=.000$ ), individual development motivation ( $.195^{**}$ ,  $p=.000$ ), in a decreasing order, but negatively correlated with immediate achievement motivation ( $-.153^{**}$ ,  $p=.001$ ) and not significantly related to learning situation motivation ( $.079$ ,  $p=.092$ ).

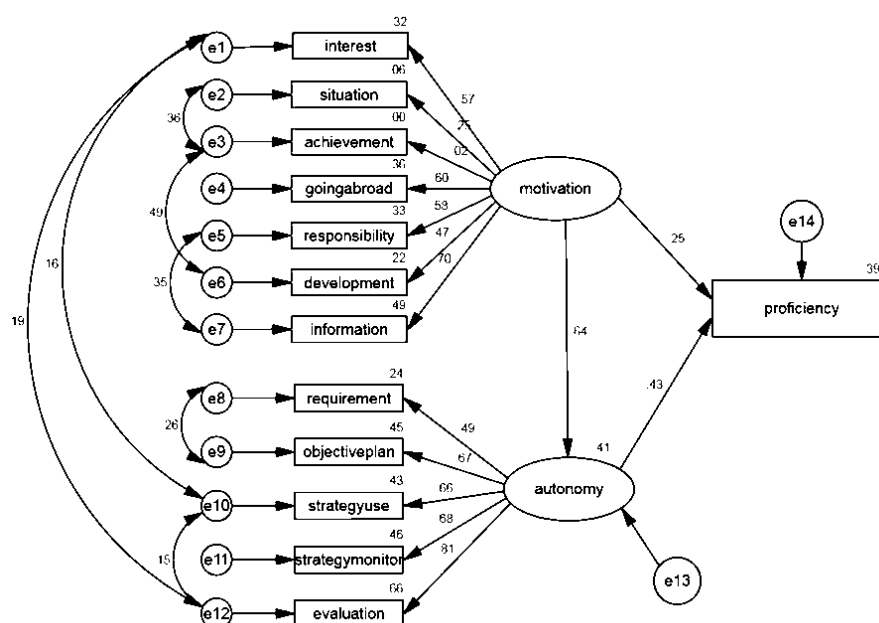
### **Predictability of Language Proficiency through Learning Motivation and Autonomy**

To understand the correlations among learning motivation, autonomy, and language proficiency more deeply, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was performed to find out how the two variables predict the variance of language proficiency. From the literature, it was assumed that learning motivation could directly or indirectly affect English language proficiency through learner autonomy. With English language proficiency being an observed variable, learning motivation and learner autonomy as latent variables, the model was drawn and analyzed by AMOS 21.0.

**Table 4: Model Fit Summary**

Model	Fit Index					
	Chi-square/df	p	GFI	CFI	AGFI	RMSEA
	69.6/16=4.35	.326	.960	.985	.956	.033

Then multiple fit indices were used to evaluate the default model. As presented in Table 4, CMIN/DF was 4.35 and  $p = .326$ , suggesting that the data well match with the default model, for CMIN/DF value of less than 5 and the Chi-square value bigger than .05 indicate a good model fit (Wu, 2010). In addition, other models fit indices like  $GFI = .960$ ,  $CFI = .985$ ,  $AGFI = .956$ , and  $RMSEA = .033$  showed that the data in the present study fit the default model very well. When GFI, CFI, AGFI values were more significant than .95 and RMSEA value less than .06, the model was a perfect fit (Wu, 2010).

**Figure 1: Path Analysis Diagram of Learning Motivation and Autonomy to Language Proficiency**

As shown in Figure 1, the standardized direct effects of learning motivation and learner autonomy on language proficiency were  $\beta_1 = .25$  and  $\beta_2 = .43$  respectively, suggesting that both variables could directly and significantly influence English language proficiency. In addition, learning motivation could directly affect learner autonomy with standardized coefficient  $\beta_3 = .64$ , so learning motivation could indirectly affect English language proficiency through the mediating function of learner autonomy. Consequently, the total effects of learning motivation on language proficiency were  $.53 (\beta_1 + \beta_2 \times \beta_3)$ , which was bigger than that of learner autonomy to language proficiency (.43). It can be concluded that learning motivations can affect language proficiency more significantly when compared with learner autonomy. Moreover, information media motivation contributed most to the total learning motivations, which indicates that university students in today's China have the strong desire to get information for daily communication, enjoyment, self-study, and the understanding of the world. As for learner autonomy, the most influential variable was the

evaluation of learning process, showing that the ability to evaluate one's learning progress and outcomes can genuinely examine whether one has the independent learning ability or not.

## Discussion

The findings of this study, that learning motivation was strongly and positively associated with language proficiency, echo with the study of Tan et al. (2017), Ebrahimi and Heidarypur (2016), Teng and Xu (2015), and Jannati and Marzban (2014), indicating that the stronger learning motivation students have, the higher achievements they will achieve in foreign language acquisition. As a consequence, a substantial motivation is required to learn a foreign language well; otherwise, the whole learning process will be unbearable, cumbersome, and tedious. That intrinsic interest motivation has the highest significant positive correlation with language proficiency, which is in line with the results of Teng and Xu (2015), which further verifies that interest is the best teacher in students' language study, for intrinsic interests can motivate students to actively take part in various learning activities, frequently communicate with the teacher as well as their peers, and voluntarily present their opinions during class. Thus, it is suggested that language teachers should organize various learning activities like debates, discussions, role-play, and movie watching to arouse students' interests in learning the English language. Nevertheless, Binalet and Guerra (2014) found no significant relationship between learning motivation and English language proficiency. The reason may be that in their study, the participants' reported language proficiency was mainly their grammatical academic achievement. If the participants were given more straightforward and more comprehensible learning tasks, their language proficiency would be more correlated with their reported motivation.

The findings, where there exists the statistically significant positive relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency, have acknowledged the correlation in the studies of Ebrahimi and Heidarypur (2016) and Mohamadpour (2013). Moreover, it is consistent with results from Tan and Zhang (2015) who found that the subcategories of learner autonomy: evaluation of learning process, teaching aims and requirements, using learning strategies, setting up learning objectives and study plans were significantly and positively correlated with language proficiency. As a result, the improvement of students' English language proficiency cannot be separated from their high level of learner autonomy because, in the Internet age, learners cannot be passive information receivers anymore, but active interpreters and constructors of new knowledge instead (Jia, Zhang, & Shi, 2016). Meanwhile, many countries set up the long-term educational goal to promote students' learning autonomy for increasing their competitiveness in the age of globalization (Shang & Kou, 2015). Therefore, it is of great importance that English teachers should promote learner autonomy for better-improving students' English language proficiency. For example, teachers can assist their students in setting up learning objectives, making study plans, using and monitoring learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes.

The results of this study have verified Garcia and Pintrich' (1996) hypothesis that learning motivation is closely correlated with learner autonomy. This is further consistent with findings from Liu (2015) who found that learning motivation could well predict the variance in learner autonomy. This suggests that when students are interested in what they are learning, they make significant efforts to do it: processing the information more efficiently, using more suitable learning strategies, and taking part in more learning activities. In addition, the results showing that information media motivation is found to have the highest relationship with learner autonomy echo those of Xu and Li (2014). This indicates that learners in information era should be able to search, analyze, and synthesize related useful information to improve their study as well as their overall ability. This information literacy is precisely one of the striking features of learner autonomy (Liu & Jiang, 2009). However, it is

surprising to find that immediate achievement motivation has a negative relationship with learner autonomy, which echoes the findings in the study of Xu and Li (2014). This shows that in an exam-oriented context, learners often pay too much attention to their academic achievements, which is detrimental to the promotion of learner autonomy.

The results of path analysis by AMOS 21.0 is in line with findings of Yang's (2013) study in that both motivation and learner autonomy could influence English learning achievement, and motivation could affect language achievement through the mediating variable: learner autonomy. Similar results are also found in Teng and Xu's (2015) study that language learning motivation, autonomy, and language proficiency had mutual relationships with each other. However, the results of the regression analysis in Yang's (2013) study showed that learner autonomy could influence students' English learning proficiency more greatly when compared with learning motivations, which is contradictory to the results of this study that learning motivations could exert more influence on language proficiency. The reason may lie in the fact that Yang (2013) does not take the indirect effect of learning motivations on language proficiency into consideration. Although learning motivations can predict the variance of language proficiency better, language lecturers cannot ignore the contribution of learner autonomy in improving students' language proficiency. As a consequence, language lecturers should change their dominant role in the classroom to the organizer and manager in various learning activities. Provided that students are given more freedom to select learning material, design learning activities, and evaluate learning process, they can gradually become autonomous learners who are active, reflective, creative, responsible, disciplined, and confident. Nevertheless, it should be noted that "autonomy is achieved slowly, through struggling towards it, through careful training and careful preparation on the teacher's part as well as on the learner's" (Dickinson, 1995).

## Conclusion

This study was conducted with the purpose of exploring the relationships among learning motivation, autonomy, and language proficiency in Chinese EFL learners. Results of the Pearson correlation analysis indicated that language proficiency was significantly and positively correlated with motivations of intrinsic interest, going abroad, immediate achievement, social responsibility, and information media, but not considerably related to learning situation motivation and individual development motivation. In addition, the positive relationship was found between language proficiency and learner autonomy. Among subcategories of learner autonomy, evaluation of learning process was found to have the highest positive relationship with language proficiency. Moreover, learner autonomy was positively and significantly correlated with the overall learning motivation, but negatively correlated with immediate achievement motivation and not substantially related to learning situation motivation. In sum, there existed interrelationships between the three variables: learning motivation and learner autonomy were significantly and positively correlated with each other, and both of them had significant positive relationships with language proficiency. Results from the path analysis by Structural Equation Modeling in AMOS 21.0 indicated that learning motivation could affect language proficiency more significantly when compared with learner autonomy.

However, there were still some limitations in the present study. First, the sample cases only covered a small number of students in one university in mainland China. Thus the findings were confined to this university only. Second, students' language proficiency in this study was measured from the aspect of listening, reading, translating and writing proficiencies because CET-4 only covers those issues. No further effort was made to measure the speaking proficiency because the measurement of it would be too challenging. The final limitation is that qualitative data were not collected or analyzed in this study, e.g., data

collected from interviews with language lecturers and students. It might be interesting to adopt a quantitative-qualitative methods design in the future study to explore more factors affecting language proficiency and identifying the causal links between the investigated variables.

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